

Learn How to Define Your Priorities and Use Them for Success: How to Get Unfrazzled

By *Kate Ahern*

It took me years to figure out why, despite becoming a time management rock star, I still felt like I was drowning. Law and life ask a lot of women. Opening your to-do list probably feels like when my toddler picks up a roll of toilet paper by the end square and it unrolls across the entire room like a medieval scroll. We typically attempt to handle the many demands of law and life in three ways: planning, organizing, and powering through.

“There’s just never enough time to keep up with everything!”¹

You Plan and Organize

Think of your to-do list, your beautiful paper planner full of tasks (*ah, that new planner high . . . full of possibility and clean, unspoiled pages*), calendar, time blocks, sticky notes, emails to yourself, phone reminders, the latest productivity hack, and so on. We’re convinced that more organization, or more planning, or the right system, will be the panacea that finally gives us enough time to keep up with everything.

(Spoiler: Not so much.)

You Power Through

Next, we power through and try to be more focused, efficient, and productive because we’re also convinced that mustering a bit more will power, discipline, or focus is the key to making it all fit.

(Spoiler: Also, not so much.)

1. Throughout this chapter, I’ll share quotes from women I’ve helped. While this chapter is the story of my own journey, it’s also the shared story of many others, and I’d like you to hear their voices as well. After you read this chapter, I’d love to hear from you, too!

We keep doing these same two things, partly because it's all we know. No one teaches us the skills we need to handle it all. Most importantly though, it's all we feel we can control. *Let's break the fourth wall and put that in bold; it's that important: **Planning and powering through are all we feel we can control.*** The gender bias women face every day makes it feel unrealistic to control the firehose of stuff coming at us, to stop, or to say no, so we plan and power through to try to make it all fit instead. Let's take three examples of how this unfolds in our day-to-day lives:

Guilt

Women are expected to be communal and nurturing and to take care of others. We're supposed to say yes, be responsive to others, and worry about what someone will think or feel if we don't take care of something. This particular flavor of gender bias leads us to feel guilty, pretty much no matter what we're doing. We always feel like we should be doing something else. Setting and enforcing boundaries triggers even more guilt.

Guilt dials up the pressure to say "yes" to every ask and task. BUT WHAT IF the guilt you're feeling lacks credibility because it's external? What if that guilt is not a reliable internal indicator to follow but just a reflection of gender bias?



"I have so much guilt related to each piece of time. If I'm doing one thing, I'm not doing another. Then I feel guilty that I'm not fully present."

"I . . . tried to do everything and wiped myself out. I either didn't cut stuff out or I did and then felt guilty about it."

"I'm a people-pleaser."

Perfectionism

Society expects women to be perfect. Our impressive, brilliant accomplishments are constantly undervalued—another gross flavor of gender bias. When we absorb those messages over a lifetime, we tend to internalize pressure to be perfect. In other words, we often assume that being a perfectionist is just part of who we are. However, while you may have

a healthy drive to produce quality work and outcomes, the unhealthy perfectionism holding many women back is a result of years of gender bias and societal expectations. In other words, *the call is coming from outside the house!*

Perfectionism dials up the pressure to get an A+ in everything we do and makes it difficult to allow asks and tasks to take up only the appropriate amount of time and attention. BUT WHAT IF you are not really a perfectionist? What if your appropriately smart and thorough tendencies are just flooded with gender bias until they turn into a perfectionism problem?

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is that awful feeling that you're really not as capable as your mountain of gold stars, degrees, and accomplishments suggests. The constant doubt of yourself and your abilities. The feeling that you don't really belong here. Those nagging feelings lead us to try to prove ourselves constantly. We struggle to rest or celebrate between the accomplishments that make us feel worthy, prove we can do this, or show we belong here. *Get those dots Ms. Pac-Man! Level unlocked, boom, accomplished; on to the next!*

Women are routinely assumed to be less competent, less committed. We face subtle, trivializing,

“I lose so much time trying to do everything perfectly.”

“I'm not good enough to do this.”

“I'm just a perfectionist.”

“Everything always takes me longer than I think it will.”

“I can't do this.”

“These people are better/smarter/deeper/more impactful/more successful than me.”

“I'm not smart enough to. . .”

“I'm not going to make it as a. . .”

“There's just something wrong with me that I can't do this; I'm different than everyone else.”

“I'm an imposter and someone will find out.”

gaslighting comments. We're also the subject of "benevolent sexism," which results in less challenging assignments and opportunities, to protect us from what others assume we cannot handle. It's not surprising we doubt ourselves. It would be a miracle if we didn't!

So-called imposter syndrome leads us to fill our time with lots of projects that don't serve us, get us the results we want, or take us where we want to go (looking at you, most committees I've ever been on). BUT WHAT IF imposter syndrome is not just an internal issue for you to solve? What if instead you're feeling the impact of a lifetime of gender bias?

Because we've internalized gender bias, it rarely occurs to us to do anything other than just try to fit it all in and get it all done. Remember Monica's secret closet on *Friends*? If you were busy watching *How I Met Your Mother* instead, let me catch you up. Monica was known for having it all together; her apartment and stuff were always perfectly clean and organized. But later in the series we learn Monica has a secret, mega-disorganized closet full of miscellaneous things she couldn't fit anywhere else. She needed people to think she had it all together, all figured out, so she was terrified someone would find out about the messy closet. (Could this metaphor be any more thinly veiled?)

You see, planning is like trying to organize that overstuffed closet. The planners, sticky notes, and lists feel great at first, but it will keep returning to chaos until you declutter. Powering through is like trying to muster an extra bit of discipline, throwing all your body weight against that closet door, willing it all to fit. It might work for a moment, but eventually the stressed hinges will break.

Meanwhile, the world's answer is throwing time management tips at us, but again, gender bias just turns time management itself into another attempt to cram all the to-dos into our closet, which explains why I hear women make statements similar to those quoted to the right.

And so here we are with our overstuffed closets. Our needs are not getting met; we feel out of alignment with the life we want; we question our choices and our profession (*and feel guilty about those thoughts,*

“Time management? . . . ugh. I tried and failed at that; it didn't work.”

“Time management stresses me out.”

“Time management doesn't feel approachable.”

of course). Meanwhile, the life we worked so hard to build is draining the life out of us. We react by looking inside, beating ourselves up, asking “*Why can’t I do this?*” or “*What’s wrong with me?*” *Nothing friend, absolutely nothing is wrong with you! You are completely capable and absolutely amazing!* It’s not you. Again, the call is coming from outside the house!

As women, we’re pressured to pay attention to others’ needs. As lawyers, we’re pressured to respond to clients, to take on nonbillable projects and roles for the good of our firm or industry. But there’s no one encouraging us to pay attention to our own priorities. *And ignoring your priorities + over-filling your closet = burnout.* Turning up the volume on your own priorities solves both parts of this equation.

When I got clear on my priorities, it felt like the moment when a 3D picture suddenly and clearly pops out of the Magic Eye puzzle. I realized how much of my time and effort was unnecessarily going to things that were not important to me, and I couldn’t unsee it. That realization gave me life-changing insight and empowered me to help myself and other women navigate the pressures of gender bias and our profession.

Your priorities are the key to decluttering your closet. When you’re clear on your priorities, you can always stop and compare all the asks and tasks against them and filter out what doesn’t serve you. Your priorities act as a guide for choosing and acting every day on what’s most important to you (*and that, lawyer friend, is what psychology tells us makes humans happy*).

If you’re thinking, “*But Kate, it sounds great in theory, but how can I actually do that?*” or “*But Kate, there’s really nothing I can put down or filter out; I’ve tried!*” Then please tell your resistance to grab a magazine and chill in the waiting room; we’ll call it into the exam room in a minute.

True, using your priorities this way can be hard for four main reasons:

You Don’t Know Your Priorities, What You Most Value, What Makes You Happy

This often happens to lawyers. I decided to be a lawyer at age 12; then I spent years following that path. *Get good grades in high school, over-achieve, get into college, repeat in college to get into law school, repeat in law school to get into practice, repeat in practice to . . . um . . .* and that’s where I got stuck. I was on the same path, head down, for so long I didn’t pause

to look up and think about what was most important to me. By the time I did, considering my priorities and what I really wanted felt difficult and strangely unfamiliar.

Solution: Get very clear on your priorities, and revisit them often.

You Confuse Goals with Priorities

Goals work best when they're a concrete way to act on your priorities. If you're hitting goals but are feeling unsatisfied, your goals may not be connected to your priorities.

Solution: Start with your priorities, then use them as a guide for setting your goals, a way to act on your priorities.

Everything Feels Like a Priority

When we're not clear on our priorities internally, we look around externally instead, and everything seems important. There's no filter. Plus, as lawyers, our brains are really good at justifying everything as a priority.

Solution: Know your priorities so you can clearly see what's important and filter your time and energy accordingly.

Your Priorities Are in Conflict with Biases and Other External Pressures

Once you're clear on your priorities, you'll likely see where they're in conflict with some of the gender bias and societal pressures. But there are other sources of pressure as well. Other types of bias, how you were raised, messages the world sent you as you grew up, the impact of these factors on your self-worth, and so on, can all get in the way when you attempt to align your time with your priorities. For example, my low socioeconomic status and first-generation college student experiences led me to try constantly to prove that I was worthy, to the exclusion of my own priorities.

Solution: After getting clarity on your priorities, examine what factors are most likely to get in the way.

Back to the waiting room! Okay, resistance, we'll see you now; hop up on the table, please.

Now Try Examining Your Own Resistance

Put it in the X-ray machine and see if you can tell what's really going on in there. Is it one of the above four issues in particular, or, more likely, a nasty mixed cocktail of a few of them? The more you examine where your personal obstacles are coming from, the more you'll see opportunities to save time and energy by filtering out what doesn't align with what's most important to you (*and the more those gender bias pressures will loosen their grip on you*), and the more you'll:

- take back control of your time and feel confident about how you spend it
- feel focused
- feel awesome about what you accomplish every day
- know when to say no, feel more confident saying no, and have less guilt and stress when you do say no
- notice things you don't need to be doing at all and things you're overdoing, where you're unnecessarily using a ton of time and energy to get an A+ in something that doesn't matter or get you to where you actually want to go
- disconnect, rest, take care of yourself, enjoy your life, and feel present with the people you love
- feel balanced (and know how to adjust if you tip out of balance)

I call this state “Unfrazzled,” and helping women achieve it is my life's mission.

Friend, you're a highly educated, high achiever. You've probably been hitting the gas your whole life, and you're making incredible forward progress. But what if you get clear on your priorities and the obstacles in your way? What if you start aligning your time with your priorities? *For me, it felt like realizing the emergency brake was also on the whole time—no wonder I was*

“I feel more in control. Before, I would have tried to do everything and wiped myself out. I either didn't cut stuff out or I did and then felt guilty about it. [Kate's approach] helped me rein that in and make good decisions about my time. Things feel balanced now. I even feel better saying no, and I no longer feel guilty about it!”

drained! How much easier would it feel to drive where you want to go? How much faster would you get there? What would our profession look like if success as a woman lawyer felt this way—felt Unfrazzled?

That's my dream for all women lawyers.

You can use this chapter as a starting point to help you get clear on your priorities, navigate what's getting in the way, align your time with your priorities, confidently filter out the rest, and plan for taking focused action every day on what's most important to you, without feeling guilty, burned out, or haunted by what you feel like you should be doing instead. Also, connect with others so you have a regular, consistent escape from the culture that makes you feel weird, selfish, guilty, or like an outsider. It can supercharge your progress to be surrounded by others who make living an Unfrazzled life feel normal, expected, and respected, where people cheer you on for going after it!

Here's to your Unfrazzled future, and I'm pumped to hear from you!²

2. Really, I'd love to hear what's going on with you. Feel free to connect with me at katieaahern@gmail.com, and let me know which of the obstacles above is causing you the most trouble right now or where you're feeling stuck. Talk soon!

Kate Ahern

Career

Unfrazzled Strategist; Time Management Mentor; Law Professor; Transactional Lawyer; Former AmLaw 200 attorney

Education

- LLM, Taxation, Boston University School of Law
 - JD, Roger Williams University School of Law
 - BS, Accounting, University of Rhode Island College of Business
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Best Advice

Get clear on your priorities, align your time with them, regularly revisit them, surround yourself with others doing the same, and identify your frazzle factors that are getting in the way. Go outside, often.

Personal

Kate Ahern is a wife, mom, friend, breakfast-enthusiast, and giraffe-adorer. She is often found gushing over sunsets, joyfully crunching leaves underfoot, staring mesmerized up into tree canopies, or trying to change the world for women from her laptop in the corner of a coffee shop. She is more fun than her LLM in tax law might otherwise suggest.

For More Information

www.KateUnfrazzled.com